

Program Design for Advanced Athletes

Depending on your experience, strength, and goals, choose a 2, 3, or 4 way weekly split. A 2 way split could be handled a number of ways – a push/pull workout and a lower body/abdominal workout; two different full body workouts; etc. A 3 way split could use the first 3 programs that I list in the workout template section of this article. Feel free to substitute or add exercises that fit your goals. One may add a short skill session or full body session as a warmup to any of these routines, borrowing ideas from the other two workouts listed. One could also add a 4th hard workout to the weekly split, and a 5th day for skill practice & mobility.

Never over-train (as it could lead to burnout and/or injury), or work the same muscle group very hard two days in a row, though! If you're into athletic sports, this is especially vital.

Plan your own training cycles. I recommend looking into how to implement a “grease the groove” cycle, and periodization.

I include my own advanced strength training workout templates later in the article. Of course, each workout is going to be a little different depending on exactly what I want to emphasize and how I've been progressing. All of the exercises are bodyweight only except where I specifically state a type of external resistance.

Calisthenics skill work to choose from (by no means a comprehensive list) - muscleups, levers (back, front, side, elbow), midsection holds, hand balancing (hand walking, transitions, one arm work, and so much more), advanced pistols

Specialization exercises - the programs listed in this article already have some specializations built in. The sky is the limit, though - you can progress to old school feats in these specializations and train them to develop overall body power. Such feats include partner press flags (which are technically side levers), partner resisted bridges, and so forth.

There is a lot of variety to hand and forearm specializations as well. This includes digit grip hangs, digit pullups, uses for towels and thick bars in hang grip work and pullups, wrist curls (vertical or Australian), wrist pushups, working with awkward objects and/or sandbags, wrist rollers, and so forth.

Remember to do plenty of mobility work for the hands and to be cautious as to how hard you train them. Do work hard, but keep in mind that the hands have a lot of small delicate joints that can be prone to injury and need to be trained gradually. Start with the recommended number of sessions for grip and fingers each week. As you build up your joints, though, you can start seeing great progress! Eventually you can add a bit of hand and forearm training to other sessions. Specializing in various hollow body holds and other gymnastics related skills is another avenue.

Prehab, short for “pre-habilitation” is an important part of your warmups.

Add neck, midsection, back, grip, finger, and skill work as needed into your sessions once you're ready. Partner leg throwdowns, decline situps (with or without weight), and dragon flags are great midsection exercises. For the back, add some sandbag good mornings after you finish up your bridging work. You can hold the sandbag in the Zercher position, in a bear hug, on a shoulder, or across your shoulders.

Transitional work is a major component of training towards fully asymmetrical pullups, pushups, and squats (such as one arm pushups, one arm elbow levers, and pistol squats). In these exercises, both arms or legs will still be used, but one limb is worked harder than the other. Such exercises are called transitional, since they help you transition from symmetrical

to fully asymmetrical.

Sandbags can be used to add resistance to bodyweight exercises, but it is recommended to not do so until you have move up in various progressions and gained sufficient technical proficiency. Partner resistance is another great method. Just be sure to perform 2-3 warmup sets and 1-3 work sets without weight before doing any work sets with added weight. You can do this for every calisthenics progression that you are working that you have sufficient experience, technique, and strength in. Keep in mind that adding weight will not be safe or even possible with certain skills or progressions.

Personally, I usually add at least a few extra minutes of skill work to a workout if energy and motivation allow. If I have "hojo undo" tools available, I'll sometimes use at least one as part of my mobility work (such as rice bucket exercises or performing blocks and other movements slowly and deeply with a light strength stone), or perform lifts with a moderately heavy tool in place of / in addition to sandbag work.

If you are aiming to build muscle, either a calisthenics-oriented bodybuilding protocol or calisthenics strength training will yield results. Strength and mass are not mutually exclusive, but are on a training continuum. I'll summarize the basic ideas.

“Bodybuilding” (hypertrophy with a focus on the muscles):

The goal is to exhaust the muscles with high reps of simple to moderate complexity exercises that allow you to perform a moderate to full range of motion, and generate intense muscle contractions. While the intensity should be kept high, it should also allow you to perform enough sets and reps to exhaust the muscle(s).

The sets you perform each exercise for should be kept low to moderate, while the reps should be kept high, and the rest periods between sets (inter-set rest) should be kept relatively short. Training frequency should be low, to allow muscles to recover. Don't work the same muscle / muscle two days in a row. Three or four bodybuilding workouts per week is usually enough for even advanced athletes. Start with 1 or 2 per week if you are a novice.

Useful tactics: Ladders (sets of increasing reps), supersets, extended sets (such as using eccentrics / negatives, rest-pause sets, and/or drop sets), even higher reps, very slow reps, emphasis on a muscle or muscle group (specialization exercises), and going through a strength training cycle (since stronger muscles can use higher loads and generate more intense contractions).

Great article on building mass through calisthenics -

<http://pccblog.dragondoor.com/ten-commandments-calisthenics-mass/>

Strength training (hypertrophy with a focus on the nervous system):

The goal is to perform slightly high sets of low to moderate reps of the most difficult compound (multi-joint) movements that you can do with good form in each rep. The rest periods between sets should be just long enough to allow you to practice “fresh”. An example number of sets and reps for strength training – 2-5 sets of 1-6. Training frequency can be built up to a moderate amount. Multiple weekly sessions are viable since the muscles aren't being worked to complete exhaustion.

As a rule, you are focusing on ingraining these intense movements into your nervous system. Gradually tighten up form. Of course, it's still important to utilize high rep sets for warmups to gradually prepare the mind, muscles, and nervous system for the hard work to come.

Useful tactics: Pyramids (sets of decreasing reps), grease the groove, high intensity interval training, skill work

Technique: Tension, bracing, breathing methods, laser focus, muscle synergy

Advanced templates begin on the next page. Remember that the key words are progression, intensity, recovery, safety, therapy, and nutrition. Lifestyle factors are actually more important than the training itself, but always stay motivated and train hard as well!

Keep safety a priority when training, especially when stretching. Ease into the stretch slowly while focusing on how you are breathing, in order to allow the muscles to relax. Generally, hold stretches for at least 30 seconds each. Listen to your body and let it tell you when you've touched your limit. The rule here is to stretch to the point of mild to moderate discomfort – not pain; stretching should feel good! Avoid any stretches where you bounce, but dynamic stretches and Yoga are still highly recommended! Just practice care and caution, and remember it will take time to increase flexibility.

I highly recommend also reading the books “C-Mass” (by Paul “Coach” Wade, author of “Convict Conditioning”), and “Chalk and Sweat” (by Brooks Kubik, author of “Dinosaur Training”) for the many great programs they have for beginners, intermediates, and advanced trainees.

Calisthenics Mass: How To Maximize Muscle Growth Using Bodyweight-Only Training
<http://www.dragondoor.com/b75/>

Chalk and Sweat
http://www.brookskubik.com/chalk_and_sweat.html

I put together a YouTube playlist called “Street Workouts”, which has plenty of tutorials for calisthenics, sandbags, and much more. To view it, and other playlists, visit my calisthenics page and click on “Bodyweight training videos”. My own personal workout templates are also included on the site below – simply visit and click on “Templates” in the top menu. If you are visiting the mobile version of the site, you can find a link to the site menu in the top post.

<http://www.strengthcalisthenics.com>

Lower body and core workout

Full bodyweight squats give plenty of work the quadriceps, glutes, hamstrings, and calves, if practiced with good form. As such, you may not need specialized exercises for those muscle groups. If you are using a strength training protocol, squats, calf raises, and explosives should be plenty to give you powerful, well proportioned legs. If you want to use a bodybuilding protocol, design your workout around exercises that emphasize particular muscle groups. Keep in mind that, for most people, the calves are primarily made up of slow twitch muscle fibers, which can work for a long time before tiring out. As such, you will need to use relatively high reps for your calves, even if you are using a strength training protocol.

Warmups

Cardio, light stretching, prehab

Bridging for time (to warm up the legs a little more and to open up the back)

Two warmup sets of a squat variation that is easy for you personally

(At least 1 level down in the progression you're working on)

Deep stretches as needed

At least deep runner's stretch and/or a few Yoga stretches

Work sets

Squats - usually at least one type of bodyweight squat and a sandbag squat, or a few types of bodyweight squats

Calves - various calf raises, squat jumps

Hamstrings - glute-ham raises, bridge curls

Quadriceps - sissy squats, duck walks, etc.

Back work - Full bridge work

2-3 warmup sets with light sandbags, partner resisted exercises, or park bench lifts

2-5 short work sets (such as with moderate to heavy sandbags, or harder partner resisted exercises)

Explosives - sprints, hill sprints, jumps, etc.

Cooldowns (if desired / needed)

Deep breathing, joint circling, stretching (especially for the muscle groups you worked)

Massaging of muscle groups you worked (use a muscle rub such as Icy Hot© if needed)

Light walking / cardio if desired

Upper body pushing - chest, shoulders, and triceps emphasis

Pushups, dips, and handstand pushups work basically all of the upper body pushing muscles. Any one of these could be its own workout, or part of a full body workout, which are both valid options when using a strength training protocol. These three types of pushing movements work nearly all of the upper body's pushing muscles, but emphasize certain muscle groups. Pushups - pectorals and triceps; parallel bar dips – lats, triceps, and pectorals; single bar dips - pectorals, but also triceps to a good degree; chair / bench dips – triceps.

Warmups

Cardio, light stretching, prehab

Bridging for time

Deep stretching as needed

Work sets

Do at least 1 or 2 warmup sets of a type of movement before performing the work sets for it; use an exercise that is 1 or 2 levels down in your chosen progression from the “work set” exercise. Rep ranges for the warmup sets will depend on your conditioning level and goals.

Pushups - At least two types. Once you learn some progressions for pushups, you will have a lot to choose from. Work towards one arm pushups and Jowett pushups.

Dips - Parallel bar dips, bench / chair dips, and/or horizontal bar dips

Triceps exercise - Tiger bend variations, etc.

Fingertip training

Hand-balancing and/or handstand pushups of any kind

Deep breathing and mobility exercises

Cooldowns (if desired / needed)

Deep breathing, joint circling, stretching (especially for the muscle groups you worked)

Massaging of muscle groups you worked (use a muscle rub such as Icy Hot© if needed)

Light walking / cardio if desired

Upper body pulling - back, biceps, forearms emphasis

Pullups and horizontal pullups target the upper body pulling muscles in different ways, and progressions for these may be all you ever need when using a strength training protocol. Potential strength workouts include pairing vertical and horizontal pulling movements, including one or both types in a full body strength routine, and having them as separate workouts. Training goals should determine how you program these movements into your weekly cycle(s).

If you are using a bodybuilding protocol, add exercises that emphasize certain muscle groups more, such as close grip underhand pullups to target the biceps. Add in levers that hit the shoulders (side, front, and/or back levers, for example). Lever training by itself can be a full body workout if desired, or part of a workout, depending on what parts of the body you're emphasizing.

Upper body pulling template

Warmups

Cardio, light stretching, prehab

Bridging for time

Deep stretching as needed

Work sets

Do at least 1 or 2 warmup sets of a type of movement before performing the work sets for it; use an exercise that is 1 or 2 levels down in your chosen progression from the “work set” exercise. Rep ranges for the warmup sets will depend on your conditioning level and goals.

Two types of pullups

Horizontal pullups (bar or rings)

Biceps work

Grip work

Lever work is optional; the inclusion of levers and types of levers used depend on goals

Back work - Full bridge work

2-3 warmup sets with light sandbags, partner resisted exercises, or park bench lifts

2-5 short work sets (such as with moderate to heavy sandbags, or harder partner resisted exercises)

Cooldowns (if desired / needed)

Deep breathing, joint circling, stretching (especially for the muscle groups you worked)

Massaging of muscle groups you worked (use a muscle rub such as Icy Hot© if needed)

Light walking / cardio if desired

Specialization and skill work

Warmups

Cardio, light stretching, prehab

Deep stretching as needed

Two exercises from calisthenics progressions that are similar to the ones you're working

Skill work

Choose a few skills to work from the below categories:

Muscleups

Levers (back, front, side, elbow)

Midsection holds

Hand balancing (hand walking, transitions, one arm work, and so much more)

Bridging, Backbends and/or other tumbling skills

Advanced pushups, pullups, squats, or abdominal work

(Any of these can be its own workout, as well!)

Specialization work

Extremities (neck, fingers, forearms, wrists, calves)

Emphasis on one or more particular muscles

Specialization in a particular category of skill work or a particular skill

Cooldowns (if desired / needed)

Deep breathing, joint circling, stretching (especially for the muscle groups you worked)

Massaging of muscle groups you worked (use a muscle rub such as Icy Hot© if needed)

Light walking / cardio if desired

Full body routine

Warmups

Cardio, light stretching, prehab

Bridging for time

Deep stretching as needed

Work sets

"Century Test" (to be done in 8 minutes or less, but all 100 reps must be done with good form
- 40 squats, 30 pushups, 20 hanging knee raises, 10 pullups)

Handstand pushups

Horizontal pullups

2 bench lifts or sandbag lifts - 1 push and one pull or two sets of a "complex" (such as shouldering a sandbag then squatting and pressing it, and repeat for the other shoulder)

1 or 2 skills / specializations that heavily work the abdominals (any levers, flags, and/or late progression leg raise movements)

Fingers / wrists / grip

Work sets – variation

Do 1 or 2 warmup sets of each type of movement before doing the work sets; use an exercise that is 1 or 2 levels down in the progression from the “work set” exercise.

Horizontal push; vertical pull; abdominals; legs

Work sets – variation 2

Same recommendation as previous variation.

Vertical push (dips, handstand pushups, etc.); horizontal pull; abdominals; legs; bridges

Cooldowns (if desired / needed)

Deep breathing, joint circling, stretching (especially for the muscle groups you worked)

Massaging of muscle groups you worked (use a muscle rub such as Icy Hot© if needed)

Light walking / cardio if desired

Variations on this template can be used to great effect for beginner and intermediate athletes.

Abdominal training

The abdominals are involved in a lot of lifts and calisthenics movements, so you may or may not need to emphasize them. Still, it is highly recommended to train your abs specifically, especially if you're into martial arts, gymnastics, and so forth. The abdominals are very resilient and tend to require higher reps. However, don't make the mistake of thinking you need a ton of different moves to work the abs – they are designed to work as a cohesive unit. Use movements that work the entire midsection!

If you're using a strength training protocol, choose one or two progressions to specialize in for at least one training cycle. Of course, one may also use other progressions in one's workouts, but these will depend on personal goals, needs (such as for a particular sport), and current level of conditioning. For your primary progressions, work high sets of low reps with the most difficult exercises you can perform from those progressions (with good form, of course). The other progressions you choose can be used for assistance exercises or help round out a full body workout that has an abdominal emphasis. (Such as adding lever work, which hits multiple muscle groups, and can often be used to target the midsection.)

For a bodybuilding routine, the goal is still to exhaust the muscles, which means low sets of high reps. One may superset an abdominal movement with a short stretch period and/or bridging, for example, or pair an abdominal movement with a midsection hold, or do all 3 back to back.

Lastly, one can perform an abdominal workout by itself, or add ab work as a finisher to another workout.

Warmups

Cardio, light stretching, prehab

Bridging for time

Deep stretching as needed

Work sets

Do at least 1 or 2 warmup sets of a type of movement before performing the work sets for it; use an exercise that is 1 or 2 levels down in your chosen progression from the “work set” exercise. Rep ranges for the warmup sets will depend on your conditioning level and goals. Choose from the following progressions, depending upon goals and current level:

Dragon flags

Situps

Leg raises

Levers that can target the abs (such as front, back, and side levers)

Midsection holds (sits, planks, hangs, etc.)

Cooldowns (if desired / needed)

Deep breathing, joint circling, stretching (especially for the muscle groups you worked)

Massaging of muscle groups you worked (use a muscle rub such as Icy Hot© if needed)

Light walking / cardio if desired